Introductory.

Much has been written about Robert Browning, much praise lavished upon him, but, perhaps equally, much blame. He has been called obscure, too intellectual, too optimistic, a "bourgeois", vulgar even by many, but on the other hand, he has also been compared with Shakespeare, given a place only second to him, called the greatest poet and thinker of his age, a refined versifier, witty, full of humour, with an insight into human nature such as none possessed before him.

F. L. Lucas in "Eight Victorian Poets" [1]) says of him: "A man who could write a poem of fifty pages in double columns within seven weeks, and then print it from the first draft, leaving the punctuation to be corrected by a French friend, had the conscience of a pavement artist. Secondly, Browning had also a natural impediment of thought, which made it hard for him to construct even an intelligible telegram. He did not put himself in his reader's place, nor realize how difficult he was being." And a little further on: "One doubts at times his claim to be called a poet at all. Why did he not write in prose?"

Walter Bagehot in "Literary Studies" [2]) writes in his essay on Tennyson and Browning: "From a defect, partly of subject, and partly of style, many of Mr. Browning's works make a demand upon the reader's zeal and sense of duty to which the nature of most readers is unequal. They have on the Turf the convenient expression "staying power": some horses can hold on and others cannot. But hardly any reader not of especial and peculiar nature can hold on through such composition. There is not enough of "staying power" in human nature. One of his greatest admirers once owned to us that he seldom or never began a new poem without looking on in advance, and foreseeing with caution what

---

1) F. L. Lucas, Eight Victorian Poets, Cambridge University Press 1930, pp. 33 and 37.

2) Walter Bagehot, Literary Studies, Vol. II, Everyman's Library, p. 341.

length of intellectual adventure he was about to commence. Whoever will work hard at such poems will find much mind in them: they are a sort of quarry of ideas, but whoever goes there will find there ideas in such a jagged, ugly, useless shape that he can hardly bear them."

We read in the Preface to Ethel Colburn Mayne's book, "Browning's Heroines": [3]) "Browning's power of embodying in rhythm the full beauty of girlhood is unequalled by any other English poet. Perhaps Heine is his peer in this."

Arthur Symons in his enthusiastic "An Introduction to the Study of Browning" [4]) says: "Browning is far indeed from paying no attention, or little, to metre and versification. Except in some of his later blank verse, and in a few other cases, his very errors are just as often the result of hazardous experiments as of carelessness and inattention. In one very important matter, that of rhyme, he is perhaps the greatest master in our language; in single and double, in simple and grotesque alike, his rhymes are as accurate as they are ingenious. His lyrical poems contain more structural varieties of form than those of any preceding English poet, not excepting Shelley. His blank verse at its best is more vital in quality than that of any modern poet. And both in rhymed and in blank verse he has written passages which for almost every technical quality are hardly to be surpassed in the language."

We could support our statements by many more quotations, but lest this should lead us too far from our purpose we simply give references. [5])

Appreciations so widely differing are always an evidence that

---

3) Ethel Colburn Mayne, Browning's Heroines, 1913.

4) Arthur Symons, An Introduction to the Study of Browning, Dent 1923. Ch. I, General Characteristics, p. 13. The Ring and the Book, p. 17.

5) **Appreciative.**

Zampini Salazar, La Vita e le opere di Roberto Browning e Elisabetta Barrett Browning con prefazione di Antonio Foggazzaro, Torino-Roma Sᵒᵗᵃ Tipografico, Editrice Nationale.

Oscar L. Triggs, Browning and Whitman, A Study in Democracy, London, Swan Sonnenschein & Co.; New York, Macmillan and Co. 1893. (Expanded from a London Browning Society Paper of May 27th 1892).

J. F. Nettleship, On the Developement of Browning's Genius in his Capacity as Poet or Maker, 35th Meeting of the Browning Society, Oct. 30th, 1885.

the poet about whom they are written does not tread the beaten track. To the reading public Browning was a new experience, as regards both the form of his poetry and the subjects he chose. Elton [6]) says of him: "Browning is one of the few English poets since Milton who may be said to have a grammar of his own." From a man who has a grammar of his own we cannot expect harmonious and soft-flowing poetry, influencing our ears and minds in a pleasing way. He has to fight and struggle, before he finds a new road to suit him. So we often find rough and crude language, hard and unharmonious rhymes, jolting metre.

We cannot say there is no easy flow. Poetry gushes out of him, but the quality is often not smooth, refined, or purified. It is a mixture, a strange alloy, where rare and precious metals are found, hidden in mere dross.

Ruskin in "Modern Painters" [7]) when praising Browning's "Tomb at St. Praxed's", writes: "There, is hardly a principle connected with the mediaeval temper that he has not struck upon in those seemingly careless and rugged lines of his."

The public up to now had been accustomed to polished verses, carefully prepared for the reader's eye. An artist especially a poet, might be wild and unrestrained in his private life, but when he appeared before the public, he was dressed for society, so to speak, combed and brushed, in spotless evening dress and shining patent-leather shoes. Think of Shelley's melodious verses, enchanting to

---

Paul de Reul, L'Art et la Pensée de R. Browning, Bruxelles, Maurice Lambertin, 1929.

Pierre Berger, Les Grands Ecrivains Etrangers, Robert Browning, Paris, Bloud et Cie, 1912.

Depreciative.

Article by *R. Bentley* in Temple Bar, Vol. XXVI, No. III. The Poetry of the Period, Mr. Browning.

Article in the North British Review, Oct. 1869, entitled: Mr. Browning's Latest Poetry, London, Melcam and Norgate, 1870.

James Bertram Oldham, B.A., On the Difficulties or Obscurities encountered in a Study of Browning's Poems; 65th Meeting of the Browning Society, Feb. 22nd, 1889.

6) Oliver Elton, A Survey of English Literature 1830—1880, Vol. I, p. 392. London, Edw. Arnold, 1920.

7) Ruskin, Modern Painters, Vol. IV, pp. 377—9.

the ear. His thoughts might be erratic and difficult to the understanding, but the reader could easily be lulled by the mere beauty of his musical lines. Byron's outward appearance might be more slovenly, yet it was still acceptable, and laid claim to a pleasant smoothness. But with Browning we have none of this; he showed his poetical undress, there is no brushing up and putting on his Sunday best. We can almost see and hear him think, detect the machinery at work. And the public was aghast, as it always is aghast at everything that is new and out of the common. It began at once to depreciate, to cry down, and only the most sagacious took the trouble to sift and try to find out if there was any reason to be aghast, if it was not mere inertia on their part to condemn, if it was not a case of something absolutely fresh and new and interesting. And those who took the trouble to investigate, and a great trouble it was, came to the conclusion that there was no reason for depreciation, that on the contrary they ought to be grateful to Browning for leaving the well-trodden path and striking out a new way with new vistas and new visions.

"Ce style avec ses vertus et ses défauts presente pour nous un interêt particulier. Il est moderne, il semble d'hier. Des écrivains français aussi divers que Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, d'une part, puis Morand, Giraudoux, Cocteau (première manière) ont ceci de commun avec Browning qu'ils exigent du lecteur un bien plus grand effort que leurs devanciers. Browning les a rejoint pour ainsi dire, et se trouve de leur âge." [8])

Browning's great contemporaries were not aghast, not awe-struck or overwhelmed by all his oddities and bizarreries; they had the courage and the insight to find out what was valuable. But we are not surprised that Browning was not admired by the reading public and that his publishers did not grow rich on the edition of his works.

And what about his choice of subjects? His early poems, Pauline, Paracelsus, and Sordello are long, often involved (not Paracelsus), and difficult. In a study of these early works by Dr. H. L. Hovelaque [9]) the latter points out to us how in them Browning goes

8) Prof. Paul de Reul, L'Art et la Pensée de Robert Browning, p. 107 Bruxelles, Maurice Lambertin, 1929.

9) Dr. H. L. Hovelaque, La Jeunesse de Robert Browning, Les Presses Modernes Paris, 1932.

through his own inner conflicts, describing in all three works the developement of a soul, his own soul. Of outward conflict there was hardly any in his life. He was the adored boy of a well-to-do middle-class family, the son of gentle, kind, and loving parents. F. L. Lucas [10]) writes somewhat ironically: "His early years lacked colour, he grew up in a comfortable uneventful home in Camberwell, and when his father said 'Well, Robert, what are you going to be?' Robert had only to reply that he thought he would be a poet, and sit down to prepare himself for that vocation by reading through Johnson's Dictionary." His health was good on the whole; he could foster his talent as much as he liked, he had scope and opportunity to develop it, his thoughts and ideas did not clash with those of the people about him. Afterwards he met the woman whom he loved to perfection, and his marriage was one of great and most harmonious happiness. His wife understood and appreciated him. Her comparatively early death was a great shock to him indeed. But after fifteen years of perfect married life, we may not say that fate dealt cruelly with him in taking away his wife. His inner conflicts, his growth as a poet, however, were all the greater. How deeply these stirred him, and how laboriously he conquered them, we can read in those early works. But they are no easy reading, and required too great an insight and interest on the part of those readers who had been accustomed to Tennyson's easily flowing verses.

And it is curious to see how this great struggle for conquest in himself, before he saw his way clearly before him, made him for the rest of his life interested only in the inner conflict of man's soul.

That conflict he could realize, because he had experienced it himself, how deeply and seriously, these three early works bear witness. So he turns to people in conflict, men and women, high and low, rich and poor, the great philosophers and thinkers, as well as the innocent and simple. They all are depicted at moments of great conflict, of inward struggle — Arabs, Italians, Christians Jews, bishops, monks, duchesses, peasant women, courtezans — one and all at a time of great crisis in their lives. He was not attracted by the harmonious lives of simple farmers leading a

---

10) F. L. Lucas, Eight Victorian Poets, p. 25.

peaceful rustic existence. The crisis, the turning-point, that phase in human life when every nerve is strained to breaking-point, when all the faculties are working, and the brain is seething with activity — that is what drew him. It was as if he had to re-create in others the struggle and turmoil which he had felt in himself, and which had been so necessary for his own developement.

It goes without saying, that this laying bare of men's inner motives, added to Browning's peculiar style, came as a great shock to the unsuspicious reading public, and hence gave rise to these diverging opinions about him. But whether critics were appreciative of Browning, or the reverse, all agree that The Ring and the Book is his greatest achievement, that it is the work written when he was at the zenith of his powers.

"At last his time came," writes Stopford Brooke, [11]) "but it was not till nearly twenty years after the Collected Poems of 1849, that The Ring and the Book astonished the reading public so much by its intellectual tour de force that it was felt to be unwise to ignore Browing any longer."

"Then four years later came The Ring and the Book," writes Lyon Phelps, [12]) "which a contemporary review pronounced to be the most precious and profound spiritual treasure which England has received since the days of Shakespeare.

Enthusiastically Professor Paul de Reul says [13]) "L'Anneau et le Livre montre cette assurance de la maturité où l'auteur se soucie moins de produire une oeuvre irréprochable que de s'exprimer intégralement. Il n'attend pas l'inspiration pour écrire, il l'eut au depart et sait qu'il la retrouvera en chemin. Les parties moins poétiques nous dédommageront par l'intérêt philosophique ou pittoresque."

Man's life being mostly built up of chance happenings, this work would never have been written if a certain Signor Cencini, a Florentine lawyer, had not been much interested in a Roman murder

---

11) Stopford Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning, Vol. II, p. 14. London, Pitman and Sons, 1906.

12) W. Lyon Phelps, R. Browning, How to know him, p. 25. London, John Murray.

13) Prof. P. de Reul, L'Art et la Pensée de R. Browning, p. 350. Bruxelles, Maurice Lambertin, 1929.

case which took place in the year 1698. He seems to have offered his much esteemed advice to one of the Roman lawyers pleading in the case, but from the letter of this lawyer, Giacinto Archangeli, it appears that his offer came too late. His Roman colleagues provided him with all the briefs and other data referring to the trial. These papers he put together in a little booklet with a yellow cover. In some way or other this booklet eventually found its way to a Florentine book-stall, where on that particular day in June 1859, "among the litter of odds and ends, exposed for sale in the Piazza San Lorenzo" Browning lighted upon the "square old Yellow Book, part print, part manuscript," which contained the crude fact from which his poem of the Franceschini murder case was developed. So, next to chance, we are indebted to Cencini for Robert Browning's greatest work, the culmination of his combined genius and learning, this wonderful document of the nineteenth century.

The Old Yellow Book was a godsend to Browning in every respect. The story itself being one great unsolved problem, he found in it, moreover, all his beloved themes — the lover, the great hater, the tender woman, the wise philosophic religious old man, the Italian landscape, a crowded Roman scene, the casuistry of the Law. He can bring into it the clever reasoning of Bishop Blougram or Mr Sludge, the tenderness of his many love-poems, the grotesqueness and the rude rhymes of his Caliban, and Holy Cross Day, the Italian atmosphere of The Englishman in Italy, the contemplative and philosophic moods of Rabbi ben Ezra, and A Death in the Desert; in short, his poems of hatred and heroism and sacrifice, his descriptions of mean and noble characters. So no wonder that when he chanced upon The Old Yellow Book, it had at once such a mighty attraction for him that he could not stop reading it, that it took possession of his mind and inspired him to his most powerful creation.

His keen intellect, his clever reasoning, his love of analysis, his great and broad sympathy with humanity made him a natural lover of problems. His eager mind could ferret out the most secret motives which were working in the minds of the actors of The Old Yellow Book and causing their conflicts; his optimism was not satisfied till he had found a way out of their difficulties, though his solution may often differ widely from the conventional concep-

tion. The fact that Browning saw life but as a passing stage, a time of probation, made him often seek a solution beyond this life, and though the prosaic commonplace reader might not feel the least satisfaction in Browning's solutions, yet for Browning himself, who was looking beyond this life into infinity, his struggling characters would find the peace of mind he wanted them to possess. Not that he did not look at the practical side of life! He was not an idealistic dreamer, only soaring in higher spheres. He walked with his feet on the earth, though his head was raised high and could look with a clear glance into his heaven of eternal progress.

Oscar Triggs [14]) sees in The Ring and the Book "an illustration of a materialism and a spiritualism as illustrated by the present day". (1892)

The Old Yellow Book came to him at a time when his genius was at its zenith. It was as if his faculties were quickened by his great sorrow, the death of his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. He wrote this book "in the shadow of her influence." [15]) Had the book come into his hands in later years, we might have had one more sorry tale like Red Cotton Nightcap Country, or The Inn-Album. For after Browning had once been attracted by the material of the Old Yellow Book, he continued to have a preference for such literature for some time. We may almost be sorry for this from the artistic point of view, though when we study the developement of the artist's mind it is an interesting experiment. It is strange that Browning himself thought the great inspiration he was working under while composing The Ring and the Book would come to him a second and even a third time; and did not feel himself that The Ring and the Book was a wonder, an enigma, a rare happening to a human being, and Red Cotton Nightcap Country and The Inn-Album but poor and pallid shadows of his great epic.

By the time The Ring and the Book appeared, the 19th century had left its romanticism more or less behind. Shelley, Keats, Byron, and Scott had written their romantic poetry or romantic tales. When Tennyson's Idylls of the King appeared in 1859, it proved a hybrid, as Spenser's old Christian ideal could no longer satisfy

---

14) Browning and Whitman, p. 31.

15) Phelps, R. Browning, How to know him, p. 97.

men's minds in the second half of the 19th century, and the ideals of a social reformer like Kingsley did not fit the romantic figure of the legendary King Arthur. The spirit of the age played Tennyson tricks. It was too prosaic, too inquisitive, it was losing many of its ideals, and no new ones had appeared yet to replace the old. It was becoming more scientific. There came a spirit of unrest; everything had to be peered and pried into, to be explained. People wanted to find out why things are as they are, what is the final purpose of all. Everyday life had become the romance of the century, and was considered important enough for handling and re-handling in literature. The truth about things had to be faced.

Browning more than anyone else was possessed by this spirit of research. He was not satisfied with the surface look of things but wanted to get behind the scenes, and to create for himself a philosophy of life. This appears in his very earliest works and is seldom absent from any of his poems. The Ring and the Book above all gives him a reason for introducing his philosophy of life. Though the subject is far from lofty, though pure truth is not to be distilled from the leaves of The Old Yellow Book, yet Browning uses all these matters of minor importance in his search for the spirit of truth. Anything is conducive to this end, anybody's deeds or words are worth considering again and again, as truth may be hidden in unexpected corners. So The Ring and the Book becomes "the great epic of the 19th century, because it is the epic of the enormous importance of small things. It is the apotheosis of the insignificant". [16]) We may consider it one of the most interesting documents of the time, as in it we find explained how a man of genius handles his material. How little we know in this respect; how seldom we have an opportunity of looking into poet's workshop. Even if it were for this reason alone, The Ring and the Book should be counted highly valuable for the knowledge we gain of Browning the poet.

In his first Monologue, Browning describes how out of a mass of bare facts he welds together this mighty and powerful masterpiece. He will "title the dead alive once more", he will make "old

---

16) G. K. Chesterton, Robert Browning, English Men of Letters, Chap. VII, p. 163.

woe step on the stage again" and he will give the absolute truth of the story but "no dose of purer truth than man digests, truth with falsehood."

The history of the poem is most wonderful, and is described in detail in the first book. Browning tells us how "one memorable day, June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square," as he was sauntering along the Florentine market, and looking at all its odds and ends, he happened upon a little booklet, "small quarto size, part print, part manuscript." This booklet bore the title "Romana Homicidiorum," a Roman murder-case, as he translated it. It struck him at once, as all things strange and out of the way struck him. He could not stop reading, "though his path grew perilous" in the over-filled market, and he went home, feeling no ease until he had finished it. It made an enormous impression upon him, mean and sordid though the tragedy may seem to ordinary minds on learning the bare facts. The booklet went to London with him, and there he turned "its medicinal leaves, in London now, as in Florence erst." And then he left it for some years to take full possession of his mind, after which he told the story in twelve monologues.

The story, according to Browning's version is as follows: In Arezzo lives an impoverished nobleman, Guido Franceschini. He seems to be a man of small abilities, as after many years of service in the suite of a cardinal he has not succeeded in making a career for himself. His brother Abate Paolo is an abler man and has had more luck; at any rate he has reached a place of some minor importance in the service of a certain Cardinal Nerli. As Guido is getting on towards middle age, they think the time has come for him to repair his broken fortunes by means of a rich marriage. To that end they make the acquaintance of a Roman middle- class woman Violante Comparini, who has a daughter, Pompilia, now thirteen years of age. The Comparini, possess a pretty large fortune, and Violante and her husband, Pietro can give their daughter Pompilia the dowry required by Guido. As difficulties are raised by Pietro, Violante, eager to see her daughter a nobleman's wife, marries the child to the Count in secret. When Pietro finds that the marriage has been accomplished, he has to give in, and parents and child depart with Guido for Arezzo, where in the house of the Franceschini they will all live happily ever after.